

BOOK REVIEWS



Anne Bulkeley and her Book: Fashioning Female Piety in Early Tudor England, by Alexandra Barratt. Brepols, 2009. Pp. xii+276, 6 b/w ill. + 4 color ill. ISBN: 9782503520711.

Alexandra Barratt's *Anne Bulkeley and her Book: Fashioning Female Piety in Early Tudor England* is a slim monograph alongside an edition of British Library MS Harley 494, an anthology of devotional texts owned by Anne Bulkeley that Barratt affiliates with Syon Abbey. Beyond its value as a study of a particular manuscript, this volume serves as a model of what it is possible to accomplish in an edition, most winningly in Barratt's subtle education of her readers. She acknowledges that the manuscript is little consulted, and then makes the case for its relevance to scholars. She points to its genesis in a culture that was rethinking its approach to religious practice, and then describes that culture clearly and thoroughly for non-specialists. She suggests the influence of Syon Abbey and contemporary holy figures on the compiler of the book, and then explains Syon Abbey and offers brief biographies of key individuals. She offers theories for the organization and selection of the texts in the manuscript, and then transcribes those texts with glosses. All of these editorial choices reveal a writer who is aware of the multiple audiences to whom this edition might appeal. Certainly most readers of this review and of Barratt's book will not need a primer on the importance of understanding female patronage or female piety, but her seamless incorporation of historical context with analysis, transcription, and, in a few happy cases, images of the book's contents invites feminist specialists of all periods to participate in the discussion she has opened about MS Harley 494. Primarily, this volume is an edition of that manuscript, but additionally, Barratt's lucid contextualizing makes the book a useful reference not only for the manuscript on which it focuses, but also on the culture of origins from which it comes to us.

Rather than attempt to wedge the book into a theoretical or thematic

framework that might not fit, Barratt's discussion and analysis sticks closely to the direct evidence the manuscript offers of its purpose and ownership. Compiled between 1532 and 1535, Harley MS 494 comprises 113 folios containing thirty-three English and Latin devotional texts, both prayers and prose. Barratt argues that the book is an anthology rather than a miscellany. The nature, order, and sources of the texts are diverse, and the mix of at least seventeen scribes achieves a metaphorically and literally messy manuscript. But Barratt finds a kind of complex order in them, arguing that while several texts are "fillers" they all cohere around the theme of devotion as it was practiced in early sixteenth-century England, emphasizing devotion to Christ's passion, confession, the Eucharist, and Mary, including several Marian prayers. Barratt highlights the significance of what the manuscripts lacks as much as what it contains; in particular, it leaves out texts that could potentially be considered provocative or defiant of government authority: there are no saints' lives and very few prayers to individual saints, no indulgences, and no illustrations. She argues that while it shares sources with sixteenth-century books of hours, it also distinguishes itself from that genre, which had begun to draw criticism by 1535.

That the book's genesis is contemporary and sometimes contradictory with the Act of Supremacy in 1534 stays in the foreground of Barratt's discussion. She highlights the careful dance between the often mystical Continental texts in the manuscript and the compiler's awareness of English authorities' concerns with textual expressions of devotion and controversial spiritual figures. Barratt reads the presence of only one extract from the revelations of Saint Birgit of Sweden (in an otherwise highly Birgittine compilation) as indicative of a "general nervousness" about female visionaries: several texts in the MS are written by visionary women, such as Mechtild of Hackeborn and Mary Ostrewyk (Maria van Hout), but they are not always named as authors. Barratt posits that this reluctance to engage these authors more explicitly indicates the compiler was trying to prevent the manuscript from being associated with a contemporary English Benedictine visionary, Elizabeth Barton, who visited Syon Abbey and was executed for treason in 1534. Yet their very presence in a sixteenth-century manuscript (as Barratt reminds us, the flexibility of the manuscript form was valued after the appearance of print) confirms a gap between doctrinal theory and practice.

Barratt explicitly notes her debt to feminist scholarship ("My book could not have been written thirty years ago" [3]), noting that scholars no longer expect to expand much on the "slim pickings" of medieval female writers but ask "a wider and potentially more productive question: what were the many ways in which

women related to literary culture in England in the later Middle Ages?" (1). One of the most fascinating ways Barratt answers this question is by teasing out the relationships among her subject manuscript; its patron, Bulkeley; and Syon Abbey, its chief institutional influence. Barratt contends that Bulkeley, a laywoman in Hampshire with courtly connections, commissioned the manuscript and seems to have bequeathed it to her daughter (also named Anne), a nun at Amesbury Priory, the Fontevrault house in Wiltshire. She identifies the main scribe as Robert Taylor, who was Clerk of Works at the Birgittine Syon Abbey in the early sixteenth century; aside from the aforementioned texts of female visionaries, the manuscript includes texts by Richard Whitford and William Bonde, English Birgittines, and prayers that were associated with Syon. Barratt speculates that Whitford may have been Bulkeley's spiritual director, which would explain how so many obscure treatises and little-known Birgittine texts ended up in a laywoman's devotional book.

Barratt's appendix, the transcription, is beautifully done: each text of the manuscript is given in full, with translations provided of Latin texts and glosses for the Middle English ones, as well as sources (often unknown) and commentary on the hand and relevance to other texts in the volume. The bibliography includes sources and analogues from manuscripts and printed books (as Barratt emphasizes, MS Harley 494 includes texts from both). Frustratingly, there is no index to the five chapters of Barratt's textual and cultural analysis. Apart from this lack, as a work of scholarship and a reference for scholars of women's writing, literary culture, and late-medieval religious politics and practice, this volume is beyond reproach.

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